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HOW TO TEACH THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL LESSONS
FOR 1907
PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS IN PEDAGOGICAL METHOD

THEODORE GERALD SOARES
University of Chicago

Many teachers look forward to the lessons in the Old Testament with dismay. The times are so remote, the interests seem so foreign, and general unfamiliarity with the Old Testament is so great, that they dread the task of leading a group of boys or girls through a year's lessons in the stories of Israel. Yet the reverse ought to be true. The Old Testament is easier to teach to young people than the New Testament. The vividness and vivacity of the narratives, the heroic characters full of human virtues and human frailties, make the Hebrew stories, if properly presented, full of interest to young folk.

And no teacher need shrink from leading his class on the score of unpreparedness on his own part. If he be willing to undertake some careful work, he can fit himself well for the task, and all the lessons may be enjoyable and profitable. The following suggestions are offered:

1. *The teacher should make a preliminary survey of the year's work.* If the teaching is to have method and unity, it must be done on the basis of some general understanding of the ground to be traversed. The bane of Sunday-school instruction is the hand-to-mouth plan. The Old Testament is a great unit. It has been brought into the form in which we have it by the painstaking efforts of Israel's religious writers. From the mass of the stories of their past they selected those that carried forward the history of God's purpose for his people. Every narrative therefore has its place in this comprehensive editorial plan. One cannot understand a part of the Old Testament without knowing something of it all.

This is not to say that every Sunday-school teacher must be a thorough Old Testament scholar. It is only to say that he should

have a general conception of the whole body of literature and of the entire history which he is to teach. The purpose of the articles in this issue of the *Biblical World* is to furnish just such a preliminary survey: viz., the character of the narratives with which we have to deal; the land which was the theater upon which the events were enacted; the political and social development of the people; the evolution of that religion which gives the Old Testament its chief significance. Before reading these articles, however, a preliminary study of the highest value would be the rapid reading of the whole body of narrative assigned for the year. There are only about one hundred and twenty-five chapters of narrative in the first eight books of the Bible. They are indicated in the announcements of the year's work. They can easily be read in ten hours. And the narratives are so simple and fascinating that they lend themselves admirably to continuous perusal. A few Sunday afternoons thus spent in December would give the teacher a comprehension of the work before him that could be gained in no other way, and would undoubtedly stir him with enthusiasm for his task.

2. *The teacher should gain clearly for himself and impart to his scholars an appreciation of the real nature of the Old Testament narratives.* They are the hero-stories of a people. For generations the wandering Hebrews told those matchless tales of the past as they sat beside their tents or gathered at the well curbs. Long after they settled in Canaan those stories of the patriarchs and of the heroes were told by the old folk to the young, and so preserved from generation to generation. They take us back to the desert and to the childhood of the race. They show us the gradual process of civilization: the nomad, the agriculturalist, the merchant. They reveal the development of government: the patriarch, the chieftain, the king. And remote as they are from our modern occidental life, they still exhibit to us men and women of like passions with ourselves, loving and hating, planning and striving, sinning and repenting.

And these stories are not merely the traditions of the Hebrew past. They were committed to writing by men of deep religious spirit and with a definite religious purpose. These teachers of Israel preserved the stories of the past in such a form that they should inspire a noble patriotism and a faith in God. Even young students

may be led to understand the high motive that inspired the writing of these narratives, and so may come into a realization of their inner meaning.

3. *The teacher should seek to realize the significance of these stories for our modern life.* A gentleman stated his opinion recently that in twenty-five years the church will cease to regard the Old Testament as a part of its Sacred Scriptures. He argued that only the New Testament could be considered Christian. But the New Testament is rooted in the Old. Its forms of speech, its figures, its similitudes, its ideals, rest back upon the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus derived his inspiration from the sacred writings of his nation and spoke ever reverently of their worth. Christianity did not begin anew. It assumed and made use of all the good of the past. And our own Christianity is nourished from both Testaments. Our modern life runs back to Israel. Consider any of our high moral ideas, and as we trace their history we come to Israel. In the providence of God, Israel did a great preparatory work for the world. And Israel is still full of significance for modern life.

But not only are these narratives important in that they acquaint us with Israel. They are, many of them, of high ethical and religious worth in themselves. The literature of faith would suffer immeasurable loss without the stories of Abraham, of Moses, of Joshua, of Samuel. Ethically, what rich material of teaching we have in the magnanimity of Abraham, the duplicity of Jacob, the short-sightedness of Esau, the chastity and generosity of Joseph, the patriotism of Moses, the strength and weakness of Samson, the fidelity of Ruth! These narratives come from master-hands. The sacred writers knew God and knew men, and their wonderful pictures of life instruct us still.

To be sure, there are certain stories which do not seem to be ethically helpful. And from one point of view of the Old Testament they occasion serious difficulty. But if the real character of the narratives be recognized, they are seen to belong to a time of imperfect ethical and religious development, and so even these yield a certain negative value for our faith.

4. *A fundamental purpose in this course should be to secure acquaintance with the stories themselves.* Every student who spends the year

in the Sunday school should know this body of narrative at least as well as he knows the nursery stories. No earnest effort to deduce moral lessons can be so effective as thorough familiarity with the narratives. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, should be familiar as household words. These Old Testament tales have entered into our literature and our life. They meet us constantly in sermons, even in novels, constantly in poetry, and not seldom in the newspaper. The Bible has been banished from the public schools. The tales of Greece and Rome, of early Germany and England, will still be taught as a matter of necessary education. But the wonderful and beautiful Hebrew stories will not now be learned except in Sunday school and in a few Christian homes.

The stories are worth knowing for their beauty. And there is a morality of beauty. They are still more worth knowing for their insight into life. Then let them be studied as stories, not as collections of verses. They are prose epics. Let the student see them as such. He may not appreciate such a literary designation. But he can be brought to see the hero element, and to feel the thrill, and the power and the movement.

To secure this end, a careful arrangement of each story will be necessary. The Hebrew editors did not always preserve a story in its original completeness. For their purpose of carrying forward the theocratic plan of the history it was often necessary to divide a story into sections, inserting other matter between. It is our part to recover the story by piecing the different sections together and eliminating all that has not to do with it directly. Furthermore, it will occasionally be wise to omit portions of the narrative that are not suited to youthful minds.

Of course the small portion of Scripture definitely assigned for the Sunday-school lesson will be of no value whatever unless the remainder of the story be studied in connection with it. The most satisfactory method is generally to assign portions of the narrative to various members of the class, who are to tell the story in their own words. If several pupils have the same portion, one will be on the alert to supply the omissions of another. If there are portions of the narrative which are difficult or otherwise unfitted for assignment to pupils, the teacher may retain those for himself.

Let the actual telling of the story be prominent, and the moral teaching will come naturally of itself. It was the Sunday-school pupil who had suffered from the opposite method, who enjoyed the new teacher so much, because he had no morals.

5. *Every effort should be made that the narratives appear real to life.* The students must not feel that they are dealing with people in the Bible, but with men and women of flesh and blood. There are two ways in which this appreciation may be secured. In the first place, the past must be made real as it was. The desert, the oases, the wells, the rivers with their fords, the tents of the nomad, the cities with the great walls, all may be so pictured and discussed that the localities in which the stories are set may be real. The camels laden with huge bales of merchandise, the donkeys plodding along under their burdens, the men and women with the dress of the Orient, the marriage and the funeral customs, the methods of worship, the manner of eating, sleeping, entertaining, may all be so described that the life of the old time will be understood. The historical imagination may readily be awakened in the students so that they will live for the time being in the past and drink of its spirit.

The second method of making real these stories is to bring them into relation with the life of today. And this not so much by making application of them as by recognizing analogies to them. The quarrel of the herdsmen of Lot and Abraham reminds us of the contest for the grazing lands of our own West. Jacob leaving home, Joseph dreaming of greatness, Moses seeking reform by a blow, Israel preferring flesh-pots and slavery to liberty and hardship, Samuel leaving office with clean and empty hands, all belong to modern conditions. As the student recognizes these parallels, he will draw his ethical deductions naturally and of his own accord.

6. *Proper recognition must be given to the moral problems involved in these narratives.* Those who wrote the Hebrew stories had not always as clear a moral sense as Jesus has taught us. If a story contains elements that we cannot approve, there need be no hesitation in so stating. We are under no obligation to defend the Old Testament morality. Our Lord held himself free to criticize the views of those who had gone before, and we are truest to him when we take a like attitude.

The glory of these old Hebrew stories is their high ethical character. But occasionally they exhibit ideas which we cannot approve. When Jacob outwits his clever father-in-law and ascribes his prosperity to Jehovah, there is nothing in the narrative to indicate disapproval. So again when the faultless Joseph uses the dire necessity of the people to monopolize the land for the king. The pitiless commands to exterminate the Canaanites are an old source of difficulty. But the difficulty reappears with each generation of pupils. Samson is the rude hero of a rude age. His story is admirably suggestive of spiritual truth, but in itself it is bloody and fierce. His death was rather a ghastly manifestation of the return of divine grace.

These facts should be frankly and fearlessly met. There is no need of the apologetic attitude. The supreme necessity is to guard the student's conception of God. No supposed reverence for the Bible can compensate for a confused or faulty idea of the Infinite Father. Let no student ever forget that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He never was cruel, he never condoned deceit, or oppression, or any wrong. If men thought that he did so, it was because they did not understand him. Nothing can possibly be lost by a simple and natural admission of this fact.

On the other hand, a labored attempt to defend a biblical statement which does not commend itself to our moral consciousness inevitably leads to casuistry. The student misses the luminous utterance of evident truth. And casuistry has ever had only one result—the blunting of moral perception.

Every elemental instinct that we have, the result of centuries of refinement and of Christian training, revolts at the idea of human sacrifice. Can we possibly tell our pupils that God commanded Abraham to slay his son? Can the most sophisticated Sunday-school teacher really make himself believe that God, even with beneficent ulterior motive, actually gave Abraham an objective command to kill his son? The narrator of Genesis, chapter 22, seems to have believed it. Then let us go behind the narrator. Let us show our students the primitive ideas of sacrifice, describe the custom of human immolation, call attention to the faith here exhibited, and point to the sequel as indicating the true significance

of animal sacrifice and the clear direction of God that human sacrifice was not acceptable to him. In truth the picture of the old patriarch taking his son, his only son, to the sacrificial mountain is beautifully drawn and is exquisitely pathetic, when understood in the light of his age. But we must not make all Abraham's thoughts of God our thoughts. As before indicated, such a story as this may have both positive and negative moral value in our teaching.

7. *The miracles in these stories should be considered in their spiritual significance.* All the miracle stories are parables. That is true quite apart from the question whether they are narrations of objective realities or not. In point of fact, the value of the miracle stories to all of us, however we think of them, is their parabolic character. In the very early stages of mental life miracle stories are accepted without question. All the world is wonderful to a child, and he loves to hear of new wonders. The highest wonder of all is God, and of course he does wonderful things. But the time soon comes when the boys and girls ask questions. It is not wise for the teacher to raise the point of the historicity of the miracle, but it is fatal to refuse to consider it when it is raised. Skepticism must not be suggested, but it also must not be smothered. It is not an unhealthy attitude. It may easily become so, however, if it be not properly met.

Perhaps the very best method of procedure in this matter is that of the minister who said that he was accustomed to look theological difficulties fairly in the face—and then pass on. We need not solve the problem of miracle for our pupils. Let us tell them frankly that no one can ever prove or disprove a miracle; that in the long ago men thought many things wonderful which we now understand; that it was natural to them to express God's goodness in stories of marvels; and that the important matter for us is the idea that the stories embody. The miracles are all told to express the thought of Providence. They are pictures of Providence. Sometimes, as in the Joseph story, the miracles are not obtruded, and the overruling Providence seems sufficient to account for the facts. And yet in the mind of the writer the seven years of plenty, the seven years of famine, the fate of the baker and butler, the dreams of the various persons, are all of a piece with the more evident miracles of the other stories.

God the daily provider is the meaning of the manna; God the leader and defender is the meaning of the pillar of cloud and of fire; God who giveth victory is the meaning of the fallen walls of Jericho. Let the students learn to think of them all as parables and never to worry themselves about whether the events could have happened exactly as narrated. So they will gain the beauty and the inner meaning of these incomparable stories, and will never be disturbed by the difficulties that have destroyed for many the value of the Old Testament Scriptures. The right attitude toward the miracles will save us, on the one hand, from the unbelief which says: "I do not think that God ever took such care of his people;" and from the not less dangerous unbelief, on the other hand, which says: "God did these wonderful deeds for Israel, but he takes no such care of his people today."

8. *The religious value of the study to the pupil will come from the trend of the instruction.* The teacher need not be too anxious about imparting a definite amount of religious instruction each week. Let him prepare the lessons faithfully and lead the pupils into an appreciation of the studies as indicated in the foregoing suggestions, and the religious value of the course will not disappoint him. It will not be evident in any one week. It will be a growth in spiritual apprehension.

The student, by the very fact of his free consideration of these narratives, will come into a developed morality. The good that he finds and admires will inspire him. The evil will warn him. The evidences of ethical imperfection that he discovers will lead him to see that morality is an achievement, and so he will realize the obligation that we are under to stand for the best that we know. As he sees that "time makes ancient good uncouth," he will value more highly the fairer good of today, and will expect that there will be a more glorious good tomorrow.

The student who has been led wisely through these studies will realize the development of religion. He will see that Abraham's religion is his, and yet not his. He will have an appreciation of the past and a respect for it. Yet he will see that we know God as the past never knew him. So he will come to a recognition of the incomparable position of Jesus. The Old Testament will speak of Christ

in no mechanical fashion. But the best that is in Israel will be seen to be reaching toward Christ; the inadequacy of Israel will be seen to require Christ; the developing conceptions of religion will be seen to culminate in Christ.

Even young students may come to such an apprehension of the meaning of the past. They will thus recognize themselves as the heirs of the ages. They will appreciate the joy of living in the Christian day. They will glory in their heritage and realize something of the obligations that it entails. These are somewhat the lessons of all history. They are particularly the lessons of a religious history, which is in genetic connection with our own.

And finally, the student may see God's grace and patience and plan in all this movement. He will measure aright our little hurries and flurries as he measures the centuries of God's gradual leadership of his people toward the truth. It is, after all, the profoundest philosophy of history:

I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns.

This truth is writ large in the Old Testament. Let the teacher grasp it in advance. Those wondrous old inspired writers grasped it. That was what they meant when they began with Abraham's call from Ur of the Chaldees and followed the line of promise from generation to generation. They never dreamed that the world was ruled by chance. And they were far wiser in their miracle stories, where God is the direct agency bringing things to pass, than many a historian who writes of the past and leaves God out. Let the teacher feel this great divine purpose that runs through the Old Testament. And then gradually in the course of the studies let him lead his students to feel it. It is of highest religious value, exalting God, giving significance to life, binding Old Testament and New Testament and modern life and the better future into a great unity, with Christ as the key to the whole.